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Who Deported More? Measuring Removals, Returns, and Enforcement Priorities Across Presidential Administrations 2000-2025

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Abstract

This working paper clarifies commonly conflated measures of immigration enforcement—“removals,” “returns,” interior versus border enforcement—and explains how shifts in policy priorities alter those measures over time. We outline definitions used in official yearbooks and examine how administrative choices (prosecutorial discretion, detainer policies, expedited removal, and resource allocation) affect headline counts. The aim is not to adjudicate competing claims about which administration removed more people, but to standardize concepts so public debate rests on comparable metrics. We conclude with a template for year-by-year reporting and provide suggestions for enhancing data transparency and comparability.

Keywords

immigration enforcement; removals; returns; deportations; interior vs border; measurement; data transparency

JEL / Subject Areas

K37; J61; H11

Disclosure

Nothing to disclose.

Data & Methods

We compile a definitions-first, descriptive dataset based on the DHS’s Yearbook of Immigration Statistics (YBIS), focusing on the main series for noncitizen removals and returns (e.g., Table 39 in recent editions). For FY2023–FY2024, when the Yearbook series might be delayed, we include ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) annual statistics for removals only and mark those years as provisional pending OHSS consolidation.

Table 1. Annual Removals and Returns, 2009–2024 (standardized series).

Notes: Removals refer to mandatory movements recorded under immigration law; Returns indicate confirmed departures without a removal order. Title 42 expulsions (FY2020–FY2022) are not included in the totals for removals or returns and are listed separately in the

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table footnote to ensure comparability with previous years. Interior/Border shares are shown only when consistent series are available; blank cells indicate a lack of comparable data. Primary sources include the **DHS OHSS Yearbook of Immigration Statistics (Table 39 in recent editions)** and ICE ERO annual statistics for provisional years pending OHSS release. Notes: Removals = mandatory movements recorded under immigration law; Returns = confirmed departures without a removal order. Title 42 expulsions (FY2020–FY2022) are not included in the removal/return counts and are listed separately in the table footnote to maintain comparability with past years. Interior/Border shares are shown only when consistent data series are available; blank cells indicate insufficient comparable documentation. Primary sources include the DHS OHSS Yearbook of Immigration Statistics (Table 39 in recent editions) and ICE ERO annual statistics for provisional years, pending OHSS release. Definitions: We adopt DHS usage: a removal is a compulsory movement following an order of removal; a return is a confirmed departure without a removal order; interior enforcement refers to actions away from the border (typically ICE ERO), and border enforcement to actions at or near the border or ports of entry (USBP/OFO). Expedited removal is a limited, statute-authorized process that does not involve a full hearing. Pandemic-era expulsions. Title 42 public-health expulsions **(FY2020–FY2022**) are tracked separately from removals/returns. Accordingly, we exclude them from the removals/returns time series but report them in a dedicated footnote, so readers understand the magnitude during those years.

Interior vs. border shares. Where agency reporting permits, we calculate interior share (%) as removals following interior apprehensions **(ICE ERO**) divided by total removals; the **complementary border share (%)** reflects removals initiated at or near the border. Because consistent historical splits are not always available in OHSS tables, we compute these shares where defensible and leave cells blank where a like-for-like split cannot be documented.

Reproducibility. We provide a tidy CSV file with year, removals, returns, and a Title 42 indicator series. A brief codebook describes the series definitions and any revisions, and table footnotes specify the exact Yearbook tables and the ERO dashboard snapshots used for provisional years. All transformations are limited to category alignment and percent-share arithmetic; no modeling is performed.

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Key Definitions

Removal: A compulsory movement formally recorded under immigration law, typically following an order of removal.
Return: A confirmed departure not based on a formal removal order (e.g., voluntary return).
Interior Enforcement: Arrests and actions away from the border, often by ICE (e.g., workplace or community arrests).
Border Enforcement: Arrests and actions at or near the border or ports of entry (e.g., Border Patrol apprehensions).
Expedited Removal: Removal without a full hearing in limited circumstances authorized by statute/regulation.

Table 1. Annual Removals and Returns

Year	Removals	Returns	Interior Share (%)	Border Share (%)	Primary Source (DHS/CBO/etc.)
2009	379,739	582,562	—	—	DHS OHSS Yearbook, Table 39
2010	382,449	471,793	—	—	DHS OHSS Yearbook, Table 39
2011	390,413	322,045	—	—	DHS OHSS Yearbook, Table 39
2012	415,579	231,105	—	—	DHS OHSS Yearbook, Table 39
2013	432,334	178,972	—	—	DHS OHSS Yearbook, Table 39
2014	405,193	163,836	—	—	DHS OHSS Yearbook, Table 39

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2015	324,428	129,636	—	—	DHS OHSS Yearbook, Table 39
2016	332,331	106,478	—	—	DHS OHSS Yearbook, Table 39
2017	284,365	100,452	—	—	DHS OHSS Yearbook, Table 39
2018	327,608	159,958	—	—	DHS OHSS Yearbook, Table 39
2019	347,090	171,120	—	—	DHS OHSS Yearbook, Table 39
2020	237,364	167,452	—	—	DHS OHSS Yearbook, Table 39
2021	85,783	178,003	—	—	DHS OHSS Yearbook, Table 39
2022	108,733	261,387	—	—	DHS OHSS Yearbook, Table 39

Notes on Variation & Interpretation

Headline counts depend on definitions, enforcement priorities, and resource constraints. Shifts in the scope of expedited removal, detainer policies, and prosecutorial discretion can alter the relative proportions of removals and returns without reflecting a simple increase or decrease in total enforcement.

Limitations & Future Research

Populate Table 1 with DHS Yearbook figures (2009–2024) and document any definitional changes. Add a robustness check using independent datasets, where available, and include a brief appendix on methodological differences between the data series.

Table of Authorities

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Cases
• United States v. Ramsey, 431 U.S. 606 (1977).
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• United States v. Cotterman, 709 F.3d 952 (9th Cir. 2013) (en banc).
• United States v. Cano, 934 F.3d 1002 (9th Cir. 2019).
• Alasaad v. Mayorkas, 988 F.3d 8 (1st Cir. 2021).

Directives & Official Reports

• U.S. Customs & Border Protection, CBP Directive No. 3340-049A: Border Search of Electronic Devices (January 4, 2018).
• DHS, Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, Table 39: Noncitizen Removals, Returns, and Expulsions (OHSS 2022).
• ICE, Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) FY2023–FY2024 statistics dashboards.

Appendix A. Prior Draft (Verbatim, tone-cleaned)

"Who Deported More Immigrants? Trump, Obama, or the Media?"

The perception that Donald Trump was the ultimate deportee, responsible for tearing families apart and ramping up ICE raids, has been perpetuated by the media. From the beginning of his administration, Trump's stance on immigration was framed as both controversial and cruel. The media focused on his aggressive rhetoric, such as calling immigrants from Latin America "criminals" and labeling their countries as "shitholes." However, the question remains: Was Trump's approach more deportation-heavy than that of

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previous presidents, such as Barack Obama? A closer examination of government data reveals a more nuanced reality.

According to data from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), President Barack Obama deported more individuals than any other U.S. president—approximately 3.2 million people over his two terms (2009-2017). In comparison, President Donald Trump's deportations numbered around 935,000 during his four-year tenure (2017-2021). These statistics alone might suggest that the Obama administration was more assertive in its deportation policies; however, the narrative extends beyond these figures.

While Obama's numbers are higher, the way his administration handled deportations is essential. Obama primarily focused on deporting those apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border, using technology-driven systems like Secure Communities, which helped local law enforcement identify individuals to be turned over to ICE. These deportations, although high in volume, were less visible to the public.

Trump, on the other hand, shifted the focus of enforcement. He made ICE raids in the interior of the U.S. a public spectacle. He increased the visibility of enforcement actions by targeting sanctuary cities and prioritizing the enforcement of family separations under the "zero tolerance" policy. While the total number of deportations under Trump was smaller, his rhetoric and public policies were far more visible and controversial.

It is essential to acknowledge that deportations during Obama's presidency were also a source of controversy. He earned the nickname "Deporter-in-Chief" because of his administration's policies, which included strict interior enforcement and increased border security. His administration also introduced the DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) program, designed to protect certain undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. as children. However, DACA's protections were limited, and Obama's use of deportations damaged the administration's image of defending immigrant rights.

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"Detained at the Border: The Truth About Green Card Searches Under Four Presidents"

In recent years, many U.S. citizens and green card holders have found themselves subject to more invasive border checks. For many, the idea of being detained at the airport—having their phones and social media accounts searched by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents—has become an all-too-familiar experience. This has occurred under multiple administrations, from George W. Bush, who focused heavily on national security post-9/11, to Barack Obama, whose surveillance measures were expanded, to Donald Trump, who made visible enforcement a central issue, and finally to Joe Biden, who, despite his promises of a softer immigration approach, has continued many of the same policies.

The USA PATRIOT Act and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) under President George W. Bush significantly expanded the authority of federal agencies, such as CBP. The border search exception rule, which allows officers to search your belongings and detain individuals without a warrant, was a tool utilized heavily during this period. Following the 9/11 attacks, there was an increasing focus on securing the U.S. borders from external threats, which led to policies that prioritized security over personal privacy.

Under Barack Obama, this surveillance expanded. Obama's DHS continued the legacy of mass surveillance, particularly through programs like Secure Communities. Though the program was meant to target violent criminals, many non-violent immigrants, including green card holders, found themselves caught in the system. Furthermore, the advent of biometric tracking and facial recognition technology enabled authorities to expand surveillance beyond borders, reaching deeply into the daily lives of travelers and immigrants.

Under Donald Trump, this surveillance was intensified and became much more visible. Trump's administration issued executive orders like Executive Order 13769 (the "Muslim Ban"), which severely restricted travel for citizens of several Muslim-majority countries. Many legal permanent residents (green card holders) were detained, their phones searched, and they were questioned at length about their political affiliations. Trump's harsh rhetoric surrounding immigration, paired with these policy shifts, made the detention of travelers more

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frequent and more visible. CBP officers were granted extensive powers to review social media posts, emails, and messages, all without any judicial oversight.

Joe Biden's administration, while promising a return to more humane policies, continues to uphold these surveillance practices. The use of facial recognition technology at airports has increased, and although Biden has reversed some of Trump's more aggressive policies, such as the travel bans, the reality of detentions and invasive searches for green card holders has not lessened. Title 42, a public health order allowing the expulsion of immigrants based on health risks, remains a tool of removal, and border searches continue to be a standard part of U.S. immigration enforcement.

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9. Executive Orders and Title 42: Key documents related to immigration enforcement under different presidencies.
10. Note: FY2020–FY2022 also include expulsions under Title 42 public-health authority (not counted as removals/returns in prior years).
11. For FY2020–FY2022, expulsions were: 206,770 (2020); 1,071,074 (2021); 1,103,966 (2022). Source: DHS OHSS Yearbook 2022, Table 39.
12. FY2023–FY2024 removals have been reported by ICE ERO (e.g., ~142,000 in FY2023; >270,000 in FY2024) but OHSS Yearbook Table 39 series for returns/expulsions is pending; table will be updated on release.

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